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# Duncan Tanner Essay Prize 2016

## Historical Pageants, Citizenship, and the Performance of Women's History before Second-Wave Feminism

### *Abstract*

This article argues that the early twentieth-century craze for historical pageants provided an opportunity for women's groups to bring a nascent, accessible form of women's history into the lives of local communities across Britain. Mainstream historical pageants were organized across the country, depicting selected episodes from the past usually relating to the local area. However, more than 200 inter-war pageants staged by women's organizations, church groups, and a number of university colleges have not yet been studied. In these pageants, women imaginatively portrayed professional, religious, political, noble, and 'ordinary' women from across history. Prior to second-wave feminism, when scholars advanced the study of women within the academy, thousands of people had been invested in re-enacting women's history since the inter-war years. Emphasizing the bravery and public duties of women in the past, historical pageants provided a non-controversial format through which women's groups could effectively project their beliefs about the role they felt women should play

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as newly enfranchised citizens. These popular performances capture the dispersed, yet committed, dedication to encouraging women's social citizenship in the inter-war years, and a more pluralistic understanding of women's engagement with 'feminist' ideas in everyday life across Britain.

The craze for historical pageants began after a 1905 pageant in the small town of Sherborne, Dorset, when pageant master Louis Napoleon Parker recruited 800 local people for a performance that was watched by 30,000 people.<sup>1</sup> Before the First World War pageants regularly took place in small southern towns, usually consisting of a chronological series of distinct episodes that began with the Roman occupation of Britain, depicted Queen Elizabeth I and a romanticized 'Merrie England', and ended before the eighteenth century. By the inter-war period, however, historical pageants gained increasing popularity in industrial towns and cities, were used to commemorate industries, organizations, and social movements, and scenes from the nineteenth century abounded.<sup>2</sup> Pageants became a distinct, popular way for people to research, perform, and enjoy history (alongside an opportunity to socialize), and provide historians a unique window into the themes and individuals captivating early twentieth-century organizers. The crowds these events attracted—regularly in the thousands—provide convincing evidence of continued popular interest in history. In the face of such evident public intrigue, it is widely acknowledged that pageants cannot simply be seen as 'top-down' efforts by upper-middle-class instigators to impose culture on the uneducated masses.<sup>3</sup>

Yet scholarly assessments have not considered women's central involvement in historical pageantry in twentieth-century Britain. Mainstream pageants customarily had hundreds, sometimes thousands, of female participants, mostly taking non-speaking parts.<sup>4</sup> The inter-war period saw a democratization of their roles: before 1914 women rarely

<sup>1</sup> Mark Freeman, "'Splendid Display; Pompous Spectacle': Historical Pageants in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Social History*, 30 (2013), 423–55; Paul Readman, 'The Place of the Past in English Culture, c. 1890–1914', *Past & Present*, 186 (2005), 147–99.

<sup>2</sup> In the turbulent years after the First World War urban pageants provided a key opportunity to draw in large crowds which helped promote ideas about the importance of civic society. Tom Hulme, "'A Nation of Town Criers': Civic Publicity and Historical Pageantry in Inter-war Britain', *Urban History*, 44 (2017), 1–23.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Sugg Ryan, "'Pageantitis': Visualising Frank Lascelles' 1907 Oxford Historical Pageant', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 8 (2007), 63–82; Ayako Yoshino, *Pageant Fever: Local History and Consumerism in Edwardian England* (Tokyo, 2011). This research forms part of a wider body of work that recognizes that in the twentieth century people used public ritual to make sense of their role in modern Britain. Helen McCarthy, 'The League of Nations, Public Ritual and National Identity in Britain, c. 1919–56', *History Workshop Journal*, 70 (2010), 108–32.

<sup>4</sup> Newspapers even made special pleas for male participants. The Manchester Centenary pageant of 1938 had female volunteers outnumbering men by ten to one. 'Women Eager for Pageant', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 6 June 1938, 2.



Figure 1

Photographer Kate Pragnell's advertisement in the 1908 Chelsea Historical Pageant programme. Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Central Library.

held committee roles and were often relegated to dress making parties, but after the First World War were more centrally involved. A journalist in *The Observer* in 1934 suggested women were particularly invested in the craze because they: 'sewed, they secretaried, they embroidered, they rehearsed, they committed, they carpentered, they made chariots out of boxes and swans out of motor-cars, they worked twenty hours a day'.<sup>5</sup> Small numbers of women carved out prestigious roles: professional photographer Kate Pragnell became 'official pageant photographer' for the 1908 Chelsea pageant (Fig. 1). There were also female pageant masters such as Mary Kelly, Gwen Lally, and Beatrice Maybury.<sup>6</sup> It is essential to draw attention to the gendered nature of historical pageantry, since it was clearly rooted in female participation and nourished by women's creativity and practical endeavours.

<sup>5</sup> 'Pageantry and its Fascination', *The Observer*, 17 June 1934, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Sei Kosugi, 'Representing Nation and Nature: Woolf, Kelly, White', in Anna Snaith and Michael Whitworth, eds, *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place* (Basingstoke, 2007), 81–96; Mick Wallis, 'Unlocking the secret soul: Mary Kelly, pioneer of village theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 16 (2000), 347–58; Deborah Sugg Ryan, *Lally, Gwen (1882–1963)* (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2013).

Female contributions came to the fore within a distinct subset of historical pageants organized by women's groups. There is evidence of at least 200 such pageants in the inter-war years, with a particular surge in the 1930s by organizations including the Women's Institute, the Townswomen's Guild, the National Spinsters' Association, women's church groups, and a number of university colleges.<sup>7</sup> Mark Freeman has emphasized that when communities decided to stage historical pageants 'there needed to be some sense of a "usable" past, one which could be brought into the service of present day'.<sup>8</sup> For women's associations, this 'usable' past was often not a general history of the locality. Women instead used pageants to conjure up an inspirational imagined community of women banded together in common aim, united in a collective wish to educate the public, and each other, about the contributions women had made to local, national, and international history. The women they chose to dress up as for these performances—from Florence Nightingale, Boadicea, through to the 'ordinary' woman—provided people with female role models and inspirational figures who had been active in shaping public life through their bravery, creativity, and intelligence. Many of these pageants took place in England, but there were also performances in Belfast, the Isle of Wight, and Aberdeen. Participants varied in age, class, and marital status, although organizers tended to be middle class. When compared with mainstream pageants, these female-dominated performances provided far more opportunity for women to articulate their understanding of history, heritage, 'progress', and the ways the past had shaped the modern world.<sup>9</sup> As such, these performances form the backbone of this research.

This article argues that historical pageants reveal the importance of women's groups—which often had no formal connections to each other—in creating, and sustaining, a national web of women's history-telling before second-wave feminism, which functioned as a powerful alternative to prevailing male-centred narratives. Prior to the

<sup>7</sup> Advertisements, reviews, and photographs listing over 200 pageants staged by women's organizations were collated from the British Newspaper Archive digitalization project and through documentation at the Women's Library, LSE. The actual number of women's inter-war pageants is likely to have been substantially higher because some may not have been reported in the press, a number were repeated, and because the digitalization project is not yet complete.

<sup>8</sup> Freeman, "'Splendid Display; Pompous Spectacle'", 3.

<sup>9</sup> In contrast, David Glassberg has argued that in North America women's contributions upheld patriarchal roles because—in his view—women were only represented in episodes depicting the social and domestic side of community life. As such, 'The pageant woman symbolizing the community resembled the idealized female ... explicitly tied to images of both maternity and maturity through casting and surrounding imagery. The women commonly cast in this role were middle-aged and married'. David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 135–7. In Britain, however, the women involved ranged in age, class, marital status, political motivation, and in the histories they wished to tell.

professionalization of women's history in the 1970s, when feminists advanced the study of women within the academy, thousands of people had already been invested in women's history since the inter-war years. During this era, women's history was regularly excluded from scholarly and popular discourse—books, school textbooks, paintings and sculptures in national galleries, and commissioned monuments—claiming to tell the story of Britain's past. Women employed numerous strategies to resist and revise such narratives. Historians such as Alice Clark and Ivy Pinchbeck documented the economic and social roles of women in past societies in their scholarly work.<sup>10</sup> Suffrage campaigners published autobiographies in an attempt to insert women's political contributions into the mainstream of history, and battled to get portraits of key figures onto the walls of national galleries.<sup>11</sup> But mainstream women's groups played arguably the most vital role in nurturing women's historical and visual imaginations. Historical pageants provided a particularly compelling way to construct popular 'usable' pasts which cemented group cohesion, and enabled these groups to visually depict the history and interests peculiar to each organization, from institutional histories, women's historic religious, political, and professional roles, to the importance of international 'sisterhood'. These performances were part of an active roster of leisure activities such as amateur dramatics, music-making, and handiwork exhibitions arranged by women's groups, committed to the belief that a shared community culture was crucial for a democratic society, and that female involvement should be central.<sup>12</sup>

Crucially, historical pageants provided a non-controversial format through which women's groups could use visual spectacle to legitimate the pursuits of modern women in national life, and to encourage a more expansive feminized public sphere.<sup>13</sup> By stressing women's significance throughout history, such groups actively promoted the public role women—married and single—should play as newly enfranchised citizens. There has been much focus on female responses to suffrage in

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of some of the popular and scholarly manifestations of women's history across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Billie Melman, 'Gender, History and Memory: The Invention of Women's Past in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *History and Memory*, 5 (1993), 5–41. Also: Billie Melman, 'Changing the Subject: Women's History and Historiography, 1900–2000', in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, ed., *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2001), 16–35.

<sup>11</sup> Hilda Kean, 'Searching for the Past in Present Defeat: The Construction of Historical and Political Feminism in the 1920s and 1930s', *Women's History Review*, 3 (1994), 57–80.

<sup>12</sup> Scholarly focus on inter-war leisure remains fixated with commercially provided leisure such as the cinema. Provision of leisure through voluntary action, and the importance of this in promoting new ideas about social citizenship, needs further investigation. Robert Snape, 'The New Leisure, Voluntarism and Social Reconstruction in Inter-War Britain', *Contemporary British History*, 29 (2015), 51–83. Caitriona Beaumont, "'Tea and a gossip" or "active citizenship"? Housewives' associations and the interaction between leisure, citizenship and voluntary action in inter-war Britain', unpublished paper, March 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 12.



the national, political arena; however, this article seeks to gain insight into how women—who very likely did not consciously define themselves as feminists—engaged with debates about women’s responsibilities in their local neighbourhoods.<sup>14</sup> This research captures the engagement of women who may have only momentarily considered such ideas, but who for at least one day voluntarily chose to participate in an exploration of women’s history. Although some of these historical pageants were undoubtedly conservative, and overtly patriotic, as Alison Light has suggested, women’s inter-war culture cannot be properly understood ‘unless we admit that feminist work must deal with the conservative as well as the radical imagination’ as such an approach often ‘held the hearts and minds of generations of women of all classes and all creeds at different times in the past’ even though we may prefer ‘to believe that feminism and conservatism are mutually exclusive’.<sup>15</sup>

An exception to the historiographical neglect of women’s pageantry concerns those staged earlier, at the height of the suffrage campaign. The most famous of these was ‘A Pageant of Great Women’, a 1909 play, which toured across the country before the First World War and included approximately fifty suffrage supporters dressed up as ‘great’ historical women to showcase ‘the physical, intellectual, creative and ethical strengths of women’.<sup>16</sup> Scholars have rightly seen in these openly polemical performances attempts to shape the political and social discourse around women in society.<sup>17</sup> However, interest has mirrored the

<sup>14</sup> Caitriona Beaumont’s research shows that mainstream women’s organizations avoided using potentially divisive terms associated with suffragettes or feminists, in favour of a more capacious and less challenging rhetoric of citizenship. Caitriona Beaumont, ‘Citizens not Feminists: The Boundary Negotiated Between Citizenship and Feminism by Mainstream Women’s Organizations in England, 1928–39’, *Women’s History Review*, 9 (2000), 411–29; Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the women’s movement in England, 1928–64* (Manchester, 2013). Also: June Hannam and Karen Hunt, ‘Towards an Archaeology of Inter-war Women’s Politics: The Local and the Everyday’, in Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye, eds, *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918–1945* (London, 2013), 121–41; Julie V. Gottlieb, ‘Introduction: “Flour Power” and Feminism Between the Waves’, *Women’s History Review*, 23 (2014), 325–9. For a useful discussion about the ways children and adults understood citizenship within local contexts see Tom Hulme, ‘Putting the City Back into Citizenship: Civics Education and Local Government in Britain, 1918–45’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 26 (2015), 26–51.

<sup>15</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Literature, Femininity and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, 1991), 13–14.

<sup>16</sup> Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power 1889–1940* (Cambridge, 1996), 63. In Antoinette Burton’s view, suffrage pageants reinforced nationalistic thinking as organizers defined significance through race and class privilege, perpetuating the dominant narrative of Whig history which ‘lent support to, if not justification for, the civilizing mission of British imperialism’. Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 56–7; Antoinette Burton, ‘“History” is Now: Feminist Theory and the Production of Historical Feminisms’, *Women’s History Review*, 1 (1992), 25–39.

<sup>17</sup> Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Michigan, 1994); Irene Cockcroft and Susan Croft, *Art, Theatre and Women’s Suffrage* (Twickenham, 2010).

traditional tactic taken by early feminist historians of twentieth-century Britain—interdisciplinary scholars have focused on suffrage pageants and then leap-frogged to evaluate drama performances during second-wave feminism in the 1970s—which consequentially perpetuates the idea that the inter-war period was one of feminist retraction.<sup>18</sup> Whilst recent scholarship has taken important steps to correct this misperception, historical pageants, and the continued use of visual spectacle for social and political needs, have not yet formed part of this critical recovery work.<sup>19</sup> After partial emancipation for women due to the Representation of the People Act in 1918, a divergence in women's priorities did lead to a move away from openly radical feminism in favour of a variety of movements aimed at ameliorating social conditions and promoting new roles for women couched within the language of citizenship. The flourishing of women's associational historical pageants, however, reveals widespread interest in exploring the meaning of women's history in communities across the country. These performances functioned as a conduit of social change which facilitated a productive cross-pollination of ideas about the importance of female involvement in national life.

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After the initial burst of suffrage pageants, and a spate of female-led processions in London celebrating women's war work during the First World War, pageants organized by women's associations took place with regularity throughout the years between the wars.<sup>20</sup> These historical pageants were regularly praised in the press, alongside being brought to life by Virginia Woolf in her 1941 novel *Between the Acts*.<sup>21</sup> The performances varied in size and use of space: taking place in less-

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Cameron compared the historical pageants of the suffrage years to feminist play 'Top Girls', which was produced in 1982, to pinpoint how feminists from these two discrete moments used pageants and drama to act out their frustrations. Rebecca Cameron, 'From Great Women to Top Girls: Pageants of Sisterhood in British Feminist Theater', *Comparative Drama*, 43 (2009), 143–66.

<sup>19</sup> In recent years, there have been concerted efforts to show the vibrancy of the inter-war women's movement. During the 1920s and 1930s, Pat Thane has argued, more women, from a wider range of backgrounds than ever before, were actively campaigning for gender equality. Pat Thane, 'What Difference Did the Vote Make? Women in Public and Private Life in Britain Since 1918', *Historical Research*, 76 (2003), 268–85, 272. See also Adrian Bingham, "'An Era of Domesticity'?: Histories of Women and Gender in Inter-War Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), 225–33; Maria DiCenzo, "'Our Freedom and its Results': Measuring Progress in the Aftermath of Suffrage', *Women's History Review*, 23 (2014), 421–40.

<sup>20</sup> 'Women's War Procession: Pageant of the Allies', *The Observer*, 23 June 1916, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Woolf's novel is likely to have been influenced by her involvement in Women's Institute pageants in Rodmell, Sussex. Ayako Yoshino, 'Between the Acts and Louis Napoleon Parker—The Creator of the Modern English Pageant', *Critical Survey*, 15 (2003), 49–60; Ben Harker, "'On Different Levels Ourselves Went Forward': Pageantry, Class Politics and Narrative Form in Virginia Woolf's Late Writing', *English Literary History*, 78 (2011), 433–56; Clara Jones, *Virginia Woolf: Ambivalent Activist* (Edinburgh, 2016), 154–206. Of particular interest is Jones' exploration of how Woolf felt about the Women's Institute.



traditional venues such as church halls and girls schools through to forest glens and the grounds of castles. Local authorities usually had little formal involvement; instead events were set up by independent women's groups seeking to bring together a cross-section of society. In contrast to traditional civic pageants, explicit links to the local community were often tenuous or non-existent and female figures were summoned from across history. Women's groups were, however, united in their wish to educate and inspire the public about the contributions women had historically made. As Mary Kelly noted in her manual *How to Make a Pageant* in 1936, one of the main concepts of pageantry was 'to praise famous men', and women's groups consciously sought to move away from this approach and to reclaim the histories of women.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike inter-war organizations which had roots in the militant suffrage movement such as the Women's Freedom League, who required commitment to the cause and a clearly articulated feminist view about absolute equality, the majority of women's associational pageants hoped to appeal to a broad spectrum and encouraged women from all classes and political beliefs to be involved. Although this would have been complicated by existing hierarchies of friendships and embedded class structures, this approach evidently did appeal to large numbers of women. Mrs Godwin King, of the Women's Institute, felt in 1931 that although many hobbies gave local women 'relief without much thought' such as knitting, handicrafts, and gardening, drama gave 'an entirely different kind of relief' because:

Just for a time they were acting somebody else's life, and they had to get inside that somebody's mind. They were seeing life from somebody else's point of view. It had been said that man was the only being who knew how to laugh. They must not forget that. They must not be serious all the time ... They might entirely disagree with some of the things in a play, but it made them think ... The old-fashioned idea that acting was merely 'dressing up and showing off' was explored ... They must all make their own properties and clothes ... and to remember that there was no class distinction either in the Institutes or in the acting ...<sup>23</sup>

Historical pageants and drama were seen to provide numerous positive societal benefits: to disrupt class hierarchies and escape rigid gender roles, to provide opportunities for women to imaginatively contribute to

Woolf felt it to have a nationalistic and patriotic agenda which led to her personal 'competing impulses of desire for inclusion and ironic detachment', 157.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Kelly, *How to Make a Pageant* (London, 1936), 8.

<sup>23</sup> 'Group Meeting of Women's Institutes', *Mid Sussex Times*, 20 October 1931, 2.

community life, and to more fully explore the experiences and histories of others.

Still, anxieties about being designated as 'too political' were debated when staging historical pageants. Constance Smedley's hugely popular—but little studied—'A Pageant of Progress', which was produced in the Cotswolds with 1,300 performers, during the slightly earlier period of 1911, is emblematic of this. Smedley was comfortably middle-class herself, and greatly enjoyed the idyllic conditions of the countryside—which she described as providing an 'almost feudal peace'—but she was deeply concerned about the realities of village life, with poor housing conditions, sanitation, and wages. Smedley decided to stage a historical pageant, amongst other local work, to engage her local community. In an attempt to make the performance more relevant to their interests she staged the scenes 'as they affected the people's progress' but this was considered by the local elites to 'teem with political propaganda ... in spite of the introduction of Kings, Bishops, and Lords and helpers and wise counsellors throughout and the restoration of the Monarchy as a commendable act, it was regarded as socialistic'.<sup>24</sup> Despite these views, she continued in this approach, as she felt it imperative that:

At a time of great depression and unrest we felt some positive constructive note should be struck: such a lot of people were uncovering the hideous conditions round us. We did not want to cover them up: nor on the other hand did we wish to show the people in a sentimental light, and prejudices and narrowness were not glossed over, but we did feel a Pageant on which so much time would be spent and in which many hundreds would participate, should draw people together and unite them in hopeful and broad-minded views and deeds and aspirations.<sup>25</sup>

The ability of historical pageants to impact on local class relations and inspire the community is difficult to assess due to the lack of surviving evidence from working-class participants and observers. Nevertheless, the continued cross-class voluntary involvement of people throughout the inter-war years shows pageants were sites where boundaries between women were explored. Clearly, for some, these spaces provided a productive venue at which to attempt to rework societal hierarchies, alongside having feminist, creative, social, and leisure values.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Constance Smedley, *Crusaders: The Reminiscences of Constance Smedley* (Mrs Maxwell Armfield) (London, 1929), 204.

<sup>25</sup> Smedley, 204.

<sup>26</sup> Newspaper reports regularly reported on the involvement of different classes. At one mainstream pageant in Kenilworth in 1939 the reporter commented: 'Glancing around the members of the cast at one of the performances this week, there seemed to be women, women everywhere. Young girls from Leamington High School, married women,

The central role these events played in the community in the inter-war era is suggested from their regular depiction, often on the front page, of local newspapers and through the efforts of a number of women to save programmes and ephemera and donate these to the Women's Library in London. Autobiographical writing complements this picture. Gladys K. Arnold detailed in a short autobiography that as a young girl in 1909 she had seen a historical pageant in York and 'for the first time became aware that history was real and living'. After asking for money from her father to attend another pageant in Mancroft, Norwich in 1912 Arnold found the evening such a 'revelation' that she went again the very next night. She took particular enjoyment in seeing people she knew taking part, such as 'Miss Offord, a well-known Norwich artist, and her sister Mrs George. They were always striking to look at, but in Elizabethan ruffs and farthingales they were quite beautiful'. Her youthful interest in historical pageants led to her becoming immersed in the theatrical world over the next few decades.<sup>27</sup>

The pageants of the Women's Institute were the most frequent, large-scale events and most representative of this outpouring of community culture. Maggie Andrews has redefined the Women's Institute, which began in 1915 in Britain, from what had previously been perceived as a rather traditional, conservative institution into a quietly feminist organization that provided an 'alternative cultural space, a form of female-run counter-culture' for women within local branches across the country.<sup>28</sup> Members showed huge dedication to staging pageants, and as they were influenced by the wishes of those in the locality, events varied in their scope. Some had all-female pageant committees, others male pageant masters and organizers, whilst some told histories explicitly about women, and others depicted general histories of the area. A typical example is the photograph in Fig. 2, which demonstrates the opportunities pageants provided for women of all ages to be involved, playing male and female roles. Many of these pageants encouraged impressive participation: one Women's Institute pageant at Worcester College, Oxford in 1926 had over a thousand actors,

mothers, grandmothers, grandchildren, and even one lady over 80 years of age ... There are all ranks of women in the Pageant from titled ladies to young shop girls from nearby villages who have had to cycle to practices after their day's work was over'. 'Women's Part in Kenilworth Pageantry', *Coventry Herald*, 15 July 1939, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Gladys K. Arnold, 'I Can Smell Gas'. Undated and self-published. Author's own.

<sup>28</sup> Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute Movement 1915-1960* (London, 1997), 11. Also Lorna Gibson, *Beyond Jerusalem: Music in the Women's Institute, 1919-1969* (Aldershot, 2008).



Figure 2

*Women's Institute outdoor pageant in 1927. Women's Library, LSE, 5FWI/I/1/3/4/1/023 Women's Institute Pageants.*

including fathers and children, whilst a Lincolnshire pageant at Bayons Manor in Tealby was said to have had over 3,500 spectators.<sup>29</sup>

The Girls' Friendly Society also staged a number of large-scale pageants, although these were far more moralistic in approach, with much emphasis on purity, caring, feminine roles, united sisterhood, and religious role models. The society, which had begun in the 1870s, reached its peak by 1914 when it boasted 81,374 'candidates'. Central to its structure was the supposed maternalistic relationship between upper-class members, Anglican associates, and working girl members who were supposed to be unmarried and of 'virtuous character'.<sup>30</sup> From 1925 the society began to stage a pageant titled 'The Quest' which had been originally produced for a pageant on the 4 July of that year at the Royal Albert Hall in London. The words were provided by

<sup>29</sup> 'Pageant at Worcester College, Oxford', *Banbury Guardian*, 24 May 1926, 7. 'In Lincolnshire', *Lincolnshire Echo*, 1 July 1939, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Vivienne Richmond, "'It is not a Society for Human Beings but for Virgins': The Girls' Friendly Society Membership Eligibility Dispute 1875–1936", *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 20 (2007), 304–27; Brian Harrison, 'For Church, Queen and Family, the Girls' Friendly Society, 1874–1920', *Past & Present*, 61 (1973), 107–38, 109.

celebrated pageant master Louis N. Parker, and it was devised and produced by Henry Millar who also organized 'The Gift', a pageant by the Christian Mother's Union in 1926.<sup>31</sup> 'The Quest' was so popular that it went on to be staged in Sydney, Australia.<sup>32</sup> The premise was a conversation between a young girl and an old woman about the 'crisis that comes in many women's lives when a choice arises between two ways—the easy and pleasant that leads to degradation, or the tollsome and dull that leads to true happiness'.<sup>33</sup> In 'The Quest', the girl was shown the bravery and hard work of famous pioneering women, through scenes dedicated to prison reformer Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845) and 'Poor Women'; St Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–31) and attendants; and St Hilda of Whitby (c. 614–680) and nuns. After these women had paraded across the stage, the young girl declared these women 'are dead! Their deeds are half forgotten' to which the old woman replied 'Not so! They sowed the seed: you reap the fruit' at which point representatives of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and England arrived to tell the girl—and the audience—that one could not be 'Alone in England!' The hard work of these past female pioneers who had 'ploughed the wilderness and sowed the seed' had 'made the desert blossom like a garden ... And ye armed us with self-confidence, And hope and faith and courage'.<sup>34</sup> The old woman pointed out the 'harvest' of this work as Girls' Friendly Society members marched confidently across the stage alongside female clerks, students, domestic servants, doctors, 'land girls', 'chauffeuses', 'factory girls', 'business girls', and more. At this point the girl was 'awakened' and realized the contribution women had made, and could make, to national life. She also became appreciative she was part of an international sisterhood, something reinforced by the arrival of female banner bearers representing countries ranging from New Zealand to Switzerland.

Admittedly, 'The Quest' was obvious propaganda, showcasing how this society envisioned young women should conduct their lives, infused with clear religious, moralistic, and nationalistic elements. The pageant did still have a progressive streak, however, because it created a new space for young girls to discover that women had actively participated in past societies, alongside promoting the acceptable nature of pursuing working roles and relationships between all classes of women. The audiences of women's associations and magazines were also not passive absorbers of

<sup>31</sup> A number of women's pageants decided to use famed male pageant masters to enhance the prestige of their events. Louis N. Parker and Henry Millar, *The Quest: A Pageant of the Girls' Friendly Society* (London, 1925).

<sup>32</sup> "'The Quest.'" Girls' Friendly Society', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 December 1928, 15.

<sup>33</sup> "The Quest.", 15.

<sup>34</sup> Parker and Millar, *The Quest*, 5–6.

culture.<sup>35</sup> Women could knit and chat their way through supposedly 'improving' sessions at the Women's Institute, but the protean nature of these spaces meant they still provided opportunities for pleasure, learning, and creativity.<sup>36</sup> Historical pageants did not just operate as cultural hegemony but instead provoked an assortment of interpretations and reactions from those participating in and watching them.

Women's inter-war organizations often staged pageants to draw attention to specific causes which members felt strongly about. Such performances enabled them to project their views to a watchful audience, and were also likely to attract press interest. A useful illustrative example here is the International Council of Women, one of the most well-known international female associations, which worked across national boundaries to advocate women's equality, and who staged an expertly marketed pageant in 1929 to remind members of its history since its formation in 1888.<sup>37</sup> The pageant, staged by William Henry, took place at the Whanclyffe Rooms in central London, as part of the council's International Women's Festival, which celebrated the first council meeting in London for thirty years. There were over a thousand attendees, representatives from forty countries, members from foreign embassies, and a speech from newly elected Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. The pageant was arranged through a series of chronological scenes, beginning by depicting the council of 1888 as a child with a star of hope on its forehead alongside representatives of the founders of the organization. The second scene depicted the London conference of 1899, and included successions of girls and women in the costumes of their respective nations bearing tributes of their work and national produce, standing next to figures such as 'Public Opinion with her eyes bandaged' and a group of people 'representing the laws relating to women and an equal moral standard for men and women'. The next scene was titled 'The fight for the suffrage', and an Aberdeen newspaper told readers it had included 'a jolly representative of the activities of the old-time suffragettes'.<sup>38</sup> After this there was a procession of the Red Cross Society, and representatives of 'Child Welfare, Education, Trades, and the Arts'. Internationally recognized female figures who had worked across public life in the nineteenth century were portrayed, including Queen Consort of Romania Carmen Sylva; French writer George Sand; the British Quaker prison reformer and philanthropist Elizabeth Fry; and a large number of prominent

<sup>35</sup> Fiona Hackney, 'Quiet Activism and the New Amateur: The Power of Home and Hobby Crafts', *Design and Culture*, 5 (2013), 169–93.

<sup>36</sup> Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, 67–70.

<sup>37</sup> International Council of Women pamphlet and tickets. Box 17 SICW/C/02/04 'International Council of Women Pageants.' Women's Library, LSE.

<sup>38</sup> 'Women's Pageant', *Aberdeen Journal*, 7 May 1929, 6.



suffrage supporters such as Isabelle Bogelot. The *Manchester Guardian* whimsically noted that representatives of women graduates in caps and gowns brought 'reminiscent smiles to the lips of some of the educational pioneers who looked on'.<sup>39</sup> The final scene was a triumphant portrayal of the council in present day, now 'in full-grown power and dignity' led by its President of thirty years Lady Ishbel Hamilton-Gordon alongside council executives who all assembled on the stage, such as French writer Avril de Sainte-Croix, Danish Fröken Forchhammer who had fought against the sexual trafficking of women and children, and Maria Gordon, the Scottish geologist and palaeontologist. Reportedly, men and women stood up on their chairs as they were so eager to see this final scene.<sup>40</sup>

The pageant functioned as an influential visual reminder of the extensive activities of women in the fight for political and social equality. The *New York Times* heralded the pageant as having told the story 'of feminine progress' whilst the *Manchester Guardian* commented it was 'a spectacle not to be lightly regarded either by those who know the past or by those who view with anxiety the effect of the preponderance of voting in women's hands'.<sup>41</sup> The newspaper praised the extensive use of symbolism, a decision felt to be very effective, as although it 'may be misinterpreted in detail ... in broad principles it conveys the truth in a way far beyond the power of speech, which can be understood only by those who know the language of the speaker'.<sup>42</sup> An astute additional feature was that during the intervals, and at the end of the pageant, attendees could visit stalls set up by various branches of the Council, which included programmes and pamphlets detailing their aims.<sup>43</sup> The pageant provided the organization with the opportunity to bolster interest in their activities and to conjure a supportive, emotional reaction from participants and the audience.

Eight years later the Leeds branch of the National Spinsters' Pensions Association decided to stage an 'all-spinster' pageant, demonstrating how different collectives used the established popularity of historical pageantry for specific political needs. This association contrasted in its rather more working-class roots, and had existed since 1935 when sisters Florence and Annie White, who ran a sweet shop in the suburbs of Bradford, had 'chatted with customers across the counter about the financial plight of elderly spinsters'. They felt it unfair that single women had to wait until aged sixty five for their pension when widows

<sup>39</sup> A Correspondent, 'Women's Festival: A Message of Good Will and Helpfulness', *Manchester Guardian*, 10 May 1929, 8.

<sup>40</sup> A Correspondent, 8.

<sup>41</sup> 'Women Present Pageant: Appear as Leaders in Feminine Progress for London Council', *New York Times*, 5 May 1929, 33.

<sup>42</sup> A Correspondent, 8.

<sup>43</sup> 'Women's Pageant', *Aberdeen Journal*, 7 May 1929, 6.

received one at fifty. Florence White decided to call a meeting for single women in Bradford about this matter, to which a thousand women attended, mainly factory workers.<sup>44</sup> Over the next ten years the women staged a number of protest marches which received extensive press attention. The *New York Times*, for example, felt that: 'In dogged determination, these individually demure women, rallied by their champion, give nothing to the suffragettes of 1918'.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, *The Observer* wrote that the scenes were 'reminiscent of the days of the Suffragette movement' as members from across the country 'wearing little bows of white and violet ribbon on their plain and sensible cloth coats' gathered together at the House of Commons to demand pensions.<sup>46</sup> The National Spinsters' Pensions Association had an impressive membership of 150,000, and was said to have a petition signed by over one million.<sup>47</sup>

Their historical pageant, organized by members in Leeds, was meant to represent single women who had 'lit the Past's dim auras with their names'. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* reported the criteria for inclusion in this pageant: 'they must have done so in their maiden names and have retained those names, otherwise they can't be in it'.<sup>48</sup> The event echoed the Girls' Friendly Society's 'The Quest' pageant in its attempt to awaken the audience's conscience. It began with a '20<sup>th</sup> century woman' telling the audience: 'Women today make great claims. They now vote on an equality with men and enjoy many privileges which used to be denied to them. The pages of history teem with stories of great men, but have women taken their part in the world's progress?' She then questioned 'What have women done to earn the privileges they enjoy?'<sup>49</sup> The rest of the pageant forcefully answered this question by parading endless—single—women across the stage during a staggering fifty tableaux vivant, including women dressed up as nineteenth-century figures such as lighthouse keeper's daughter Grace Darling, social reformer Octavia Hill, poet Christina Rossetti, the Brontës, illustrator of children's books Kate Greenaway, and the ever popular Florence Nightingale (Fig. 3). The pageant ended with the '20<sup>th</sup> Century woman' thanking these figures: 'You have helped me to realise that women have indeed done a brave share of the world's work. I feel that

<sup>44</sup> Joseph A. Collins, 'A "Surplus" Woman: Florence White Leads England's Spinsters in their Crusade for Old-Age Pensions at 60', *New York Times*, 5 May 1946, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Collins, 15.

<sup>46</sup> 'Pensions for Spinsters at 55: M.P.s at London Rally', *The Observer*, 6 June 1937, 28. 'Spinsters, Demanding Their Pension at 55, Cause Some Red Faces in House of Commons', *New York Times*, 12 February 1948, 15.

<sup>47</sup> 'Million Spinsters to Petition', *The Observer*, 25 July 1937, 8; 'Pensions at 55: Million Signatures to Petition', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 July 1937, 6.

<sup>48</sup> 'Pageant of Famous Spinsters', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 12 January 1937, 11.

<sup>49</sup> N.S.P.A. pageant programme, Papers of Annie Marianne Marsland 7AMM Acc No 2002/30, Women's Library, LSE.



Figure 3

National Spinsters' Pension Association 'A Pageant Through the Ages', Leeds, 9–10 April 1937, Women's Library, LSE 7AA Acc No 2002/30 papers of Annie Marianne Marsland.

now their work will broaden, because of the way in which the trail has already been blazed for them by the noble women pioneers of the past'. The organizers also sought to remind the audience of the continuing plight of women and their individual responsibilities to help: 'We still have among us numberless women who are giving of themselves in service to mankind . . . We have with us tonight our own beloved leader who is devoting her life to the cause of obtaining for her needy fellow spinster's redress which is long overdue'.<sup>50</sup>

Working and middle-class women from religious church groups staged a large number of small-scale historical pageants, showcasing the role of women they felt to have been important in history, from Boadicea, suffrage campaigners, through to prominent figures from the

<sup>50</sup> N.S.P.A. pageant programme, Papers of Annie Marianne Marsland 7AMM Acc No 2002/30, Women's Library, LSE.

Bible.<sup>51</sup> As usual, the organizers chose to focus on particular women who captured their interests, such as one pageant in South Derby about 'Motherhood Down the Ages' in 1938 at the Littleover Baptist Church.<sup>52</sup> Religious performances took place in local church halls in provincial industrial towns where non-conformism was prevalent, such as Derby, Yorkshire, Sheffield, County Durham, Nottinghamshire, and Lincolnshire. 'Women's Bright Hour' sessions, usually in the school-rooms of churches, which were already female-dominated communal spaces, were claimed to explore the role of women in history. Although with this grouping of women's pageants, there are fewer detailed surviving records presumably due to the class of the participants, these performances provide useful evidence when arguing for the widespread culture of pageants about women's history taking place across the country, and of local, grassroots participation in 'feminist' ideas.

Although many mainstream pageants looked further into the past for role models, the most consistent feature of all women's associations inter-war pageants was that 'worthy' women were repeatedly cherry-picked from the nineteenth century for praise. Evidently, women from recent history were particularly embedded within popular consciousness, and were even in living memory for some older organizers. These pageants were labelled as 'women's progress', 'noble women', and 'pageant of women' (Fig. 4). 'Great' women pageants were enacted in cities and villages across Britain. In 1938, the *Sheffield Independent* was emblazoned with the title 'City to See Lives of Famous Women' when a branch of the Girls' Friendly Society staged a pageant, produced by a Mrs Knyvet, daughter of the Bishop of Sheffield, with scenes from the lives 'of famous women' going back to the days of St Hilda of Whitby in 664.<sup>53</sup> Whilst in 1934, in the wooded glades of Beachborough Park in Kent, spectators could see Florence Nightingale, Joan of Arc, and 'other great figures from the pages of history whose brave deeds have echoed down the ages' who 'were brought to life for a brief space' by the Cherlton and Shorncliffe District Girl Guides Association, performed under a canopy of overhanging trees.<sup>54</sup> This tactic of emphasizing 'great women' was used by many feminist scholars in the 1970s in an attempt to reclaim a place for women within the historical canon, although this

<sup>51</sup> Jessica Thurlow has convincingly argued that religious women of the 1940s and 1950s must be included in debates about feminism. Jessica Thurlow, 'The "Great Offender": Feminists and the Campaign for Women's Ordination', *Women's History Review*, 23 (2014), 480–99.

<sup>52</sup> 'Motherhood Down the Ages', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 1 December 1938, 5.

<sup>53</sup> 'City to See Lives of Famous Women', *Sheffield Independent*, 30 September 1938, 3.

<sup>54</sup> 'Delightful Pageant at Beachborough', *Folkstone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald*, 30 June 1934, 16.



Figure 4

'Pageant of Women' by members of the West End Methodist School, Stocksbridge, South Yorkshire, *Sheffield Independent*, 15 November 1934, 1.

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approach has subsequently been critiqued for not providing adequate insight into how different women actually lived.<sup>55</sup>

Several attempts were also made by women's organizations to insert the lives and experiences of 'ordinary' women into pageants, to provide a more effective history of everyday life which included women from different backgrounds and nationalities. Laura Carter has recently argued that a new form of popular history, the 'history of everyday life', emerged in England after the First World War.<sup>56</sup> Within historical

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Caine has argued that 'the model of biography as the study of great or exceptional people makes women marginal, as only very few can ever fit into its framework. It reinforces the idea that only public achievement is significant and that those women who lead predominantly domestic lives are of no particular interest. But it is precisely the lives of ordinary women that are the primary concern of women's history'. Barbara Caine, 'Feminist Biography and Feminist History', *Women's History Review*, 3 (1994), 247–261, 250.

<sup>56</sup> Laura Carter, 'The Quennells and the "History of Everyday Life" in England, c. 1918–69', *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), 106–134, 113.

pageants we see a corresponding interest in telling an 'authentic' history through focus on material culture, daily rituals, and local lifestyles. In fact, 'H.K.C.' writing in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1934 felt it imperative that pageants should take care to use 'a thousand family records' to 'draw a picture of the Victorian woman', and bring 'into the present the memory of a thousand women unhonoured and unsung', rather than relying on Florence Nightingale as an inspirational figure.<sup>57</sup> As if in response to this, a Sheffield pageant of 'Noble women' in 1936 presented by the Everywoman Sisterhood at Wesley Hall, Crookes, which consisted of a series of tableaux of figures such as Joan of Arc, alongside nurse Edith Cavell and Salvation Army co-founder Catherine Booth, was one of a number of pageants that ended by including an 'ordinary mother', to inspire the audience about the important role of mothers in society.<sup>58</sup> The Mother's Union, in a 1932 pageant titled 'Gifts to Pandora', similarly included cast members portraying the 'everyday woman', 'laundress', 'housemaid' and even a 'woman voter'.<sup>59</sup> Whilst the National Spinsters' Pensions Association pageant included living food writer Florence White 'in person' to show the range of ways women could contribute to society, and carefully pointed out the contributions of working-class women such as nineteenth-century missionary Mary Slessor.<sup>60</sup>

These pageants often told histories that moved away from high political and economic commentaries dominated by elite male figures to instead incorporate the participation of a greater variety of people from the historic community. One Women's Institute 'miniature pageant' in a church hall (as ever due to the British weather) in Sharnbrook, Bedford in 1937 was titled 'The Domestic Life of England' and portrayed domestic scenes from seven periods, beginning at 100 BC showing the home of an Early Briton and his family. Other scenes included a 'Norman Knight and his lady at the time the Domesday Book was Compiled', a 'Musical Evening in a Victorian Home' and a final scene depicting modern domesticity with 'Miss 1937 dressed as a flapper in beach pyjamas and big hat smoking a cigarette'.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, pageants provided valuable opportunities to non-controversially question and explore societal attitudes and change. The following year, in 1938, over a thousand members of the Sunderland Townswomen's Guild gathered together to stage a pageant titled 'Pageant of the Women's Movement'

<sup>57</sup> H. K. C., 'Victorian Pageant: The Woman's Part', *Manchester Guardian*, 1 May 1934, 8.

<sup>58</sup> 'Page from History: Sheffield Pageant of Noble Women', *Sheffield Independent*, 15 April 1936, 7.

<sup>59</sup> 'Big Week for a Church', *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 16 April 1932, 8.

<sup>60</sup> N.S.P.A. pageant programme, Papers of Annie Marianne Marsland 7AMM Acc No 2002/30, Women's Library, LSE.

<sup>61</sup> 'Sharnbrook Women's Pageant: The Domestic Life of England', *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 30 July 1937, 3.



which depicted the women's movement of the previous 150 years. The Townswomen's Guild had been formed in 1929 after women had received full voting rights, as a way to educate women about their new roles as citizens.<sup>62</sup> Great efforts were taken to educate the audience about the past suffering experienced by women due to their social, economic, and legal subjection. The pageant, written by Miss W.J.E. Moul, Chair of the Townswomen's Guilds, drew attention to Caroline Norton's 1836 fight for her sons after her divorce from MP George Chapple Norton, Lord Shaftesbury's 1842 commission to parliament about women working in the mines, and a 'cinematographic presentation' of the women who had fought for the vote. The pageant ended with the firm declaration that 'women are not afraid of work of any sort, however difficult or exacting that is'.<sup>63</sup>

Although it has been established that the organizers of historical pageants carefully selected figures and scenes they felt to be most relevant—something professional historians also have to do—the surviving evidence suggests that those involved took considerable interest in 'authenticity' and providing accurately researched histories. Programmes were neatly compiled with mini-biographies about the historical women which the audience could purchase and keep. Great interest was taken in educating the audience about the legitimacy of the environment and the material culture being used. In a 1926 article in the *Manchester Guardian* the reviewer happily felt that a Women's Institute pageant in Epping Forest was 'From the antiquarian point of view' full of scenes which 'chapter and verse could be quoted from local archives'. Members carefully sought to provide intimate glimpses into historic society such as 'A very effective scene ... in which two widows described their forest rights'.<sup>64</sup> In the view of the reporter the audience had 'remained conscious throughout of it being performed on the spot where it all happened, in a natural wild forest ... and whose deer are the actual descendants of those of the Forest Wardens'.

Reports and programmes were used to inform the audience about the authenticity of props such as 'a linen table cloth actually used in the civil wars' and 'A Forester's horn of the date of George III'.<sup>65</sup> It was felt these objects had particular potential to evoke the past for an intrigued public. In the International Council of Women pageant, actual suffrage banners were repurposed: 'banners which had been carried in many more toilsome processions than this, and brought with them the

<sup>62</sup> '1,000 Guild Members to Take Part in Pageant', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 3 May 1938, 6.

<sup>63</sup> '1,000 will take part', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 13 May 1938, 16.

<sup>64</sup> 'Pageant in a Forest: A Women's Institute Production', *Manchester Guardian*, 19 July 1926, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Pamphlet 'A Historical Pageant of Some of the Chief Events in the History of England Taking Place on Berkshire Soil', 5FWI/H/13 Box 274, Women's Library, LSE.

memory of a hard fight now happily ended', as well as 'proper dresses of the period' for the 1888 and 1899 scenes. Women who had 'wherever possible ... actually been present, or their relatives' were asked to be involved for these scenes.<sup>66</sup> There was great encouragement of daughters to depict the role that their mothers had once played, a clever ploy which forged new links between older and younger generations.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, in the Townswomen's Guild pageant the dresses were designed by a Mrs J.T. Burnop and her daughter, the mother having been chosen as she was known to be 'an authority on styles as worn by members of women's movements years ago'.<sup>68</sup> Burnop sketched her own drawings for the period costumes after detailed 'research into reference books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the cooperation of the Sunderland's Director of Libraries'.<sup>69</sup>

Mirroring the approach of mainstream pageants—which sought to forge a tangible connection between past achievements and the living, present day community—women's associations made sure the historical figures and staged scenes were relevant to their community building aims in modern life. The final scene was routinely reserved to show the audience that they were all at that very moment in the process of making history. Although Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan suggest that 'pageants were intended to reinforce and enliven material already taught in the classroom, not to introduce children to new historical knowledge', these events actually provided a rare opportunity to learn about women's history, and to visualize one's own role within this narrative.<sup>70</sup> A useful aid here is a Women's Institute pageant at Windsor Park on 28 June 1928 which told 'some of the chief events ... taking place on Berkshire soil'. As ever, it was an extensively planned and impressive sounding affair, led by pageant master Mrs George Squire, musical conductor Ethel Nettleship, mistress of robes Mrs Dryland Haslam, words by Vice-President of the Royal Society of Arts George Kenneth Menzies, and a host of other committee members. The pageant, which told a general history of Berkshire, with the usual care taken to sprinkle women's contributions throughout, ended with an evocative scene showing 'a living map of Berkshire'. Women's Institute banner bearers stood in position representing their villages surrounded by members from each institute. This spectacle was enhanced by a final speech which was blatantly intended to make

<sup>66</sup> 'Women Present Pageant', 33.

<sup>67</sup> Kean, 'Searching for the Past in Present Defeat', 60.

<sup>68</sup> '1,000 Guild Members to Take Part in Pageant', 6.

<sup>69</sup> '1,000 will take part', 16.

<sup>70</sup> Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan, *Heroines and History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord* (Toronto, 2002), 210.

attendees feel their personal responsibility towards the local community, and also to national life:

You have watched our story grow—it is your story also ... May we remind you before we part that we are all still making history ... Take with you, with the memory of our past, a desire to help in the present, that our land may never lack the loyal co-operation of its women, generation after generation, through the ages still to come.<sup>71</sup>

These final scenes were not overtly feminist manifestos, often taking the form of a tongue-in-cheek account of contemporary women's modern lifestyles. At a Kent flower show in 1925 women presented a pageant of dress which finished with a future 'Miss 1930' wearing a man's costume, a horn-rimmed monocle, and carrying a cane and pipe, whilst female university students in Bangor, Wales used the 1932 Pageant of Bangor to celebrate women students and showed future women students with monocles and cigarettes.<sup>72</sup> On one level this was a commentary on the rapid pace of social change, but pageant organizers also used humour to disarm an audience who might disapprove of women taking on 'male' roles.

Conversely, whilst the imagined future was mocked for being too 'progressive', the past was sometimes derided for being too regressive. In 1930 women's higher education college Bedford College, University of London staged a twenty-scene pageant titled 'Time's Daughters' in Regent's Park in aid of a college extension fund for new laboratories and lecture theatres. 'Time's Daughters' told 'the evolution of the modern girl from the Middle Ages to the present day' (Fig. 5). The pageant included a 'kaleidoscope' of huntresses of early England, Plantagenet queens and ladies weaving tapestry, Queen Elizabeth 'dancing before the Spanish Ambassador, but not, if you please, to his tune', before ending with 'the Woman of To-day' which focused on students of the college.<sup>73</sup> The pageant, which was so popular people had to be turned away, provided a way for Bedford College students, past and present, who were centrally involved in the planning, to define in their own terms the changes they felt had taken place for women across the centuries.<sup>74</sup> The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* told readers the pageant was 'intended to provide

<sup>71</sup> Pamphlet 'A Historical Pageant of Some of the Chief Events in the History of England Taking Place on Berkshire Soil', 5FWI/H/13 Box 274, Women's Library, LSE.

<sup>72</sup> 'Looking Ahead', *Gloucester Citizen*, 17 August 1925, 11. 'Bangor Students "Rag": Women's Prominent Part', *Manchester Guardian*, 26 February 1932, 6.

<sup>73</sup> A Special Correspondent, 'Bedford College Pageant "Time's Daughters"', *The Observer*, 18 May 1930, 21.

<sup>74</sup> The Bedford College Union Magazine noted that Miss fforde, a former student, wrote and produced the pageant alongside a large number of assistants. *Bedford College Union Magazine*, No. 27, June 1930, 6. Bedford College Archive, Royal Holloway, University of London.

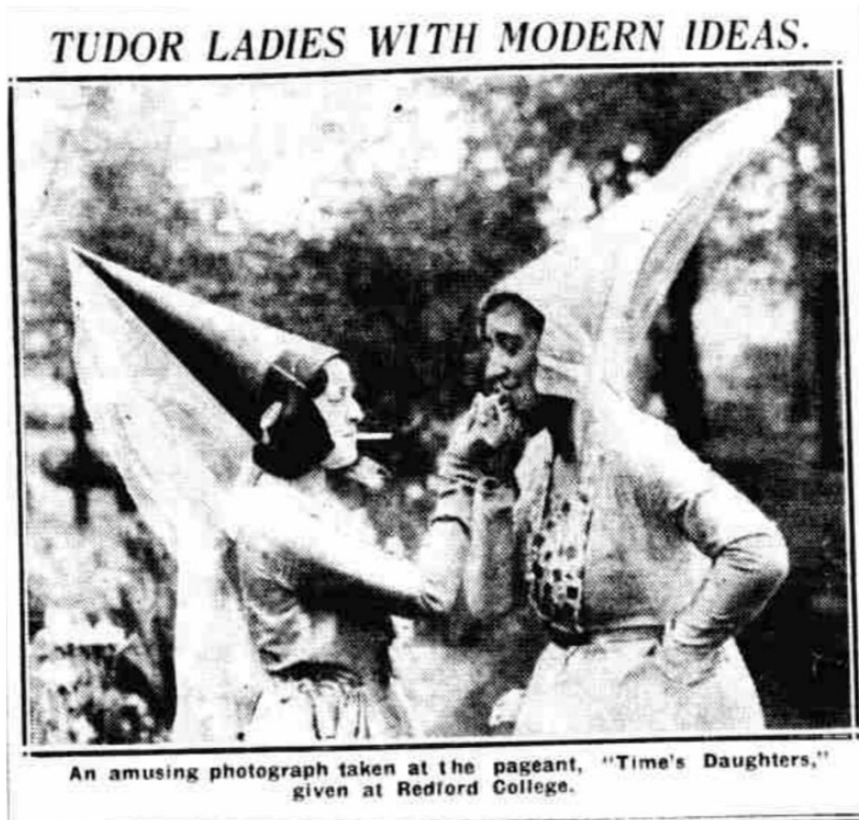


Figure 5

'Tudor Ladies with Modern Ideas', *The Sheffield Daily Independent*, 19 May 1930, 1.  
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an answer to two leading questions debated under various titles every morning with painstaking regularity in the columns of the popular Press: "Who is responsible for making the modern girl what she is?" and "What final picture will future generations have of her?"<sup>75</sup> *The Observer* also picked out scenes to emphasize, focusing on the 'frumps' of the early days of the college, depicted through a much-ridiculed chaperone 'complete with knitting' said to have policed every lecture and boat race. Lady Rodd told the audience in the opening ceremony about her memories of student days, stating that Bedford College women had been 'rather old-fashioned girls, I'm afraid'.<sup>76</sup> By asserting, and exaggerating,

<sup>75</sup> 'Regiment of Women', *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 12 May 1930, 8.

<sup>76</sup> A Special Correspondent, 'Bedford College Pageant', 21.

the old-fashioned nature of nineteenth-century practices of female respectability, these women placed themselves as at the fore of modern citizenship, and sought to promote this perspective of women now living modern, public lives across mainstream culture.

Women's associational historical pageants diminished during the Second World War, partly as a result of women's organizations instead focusing their energies on supporting the war effort, but also due to a wider waning of interest in pageantry. Still, although staged less regularly, a number of women's groups did put on performances, and they continued to provide a popular way for people to find out about women's history. The Leeds Townswomen's Guild performed a historical pageant titled 'Mrs Leeds, 1850 to 1950' where members undertook detailed research work hunting out the correct chair and actual speeches for a scene which commemorated Queen Victoria's opening of Leeds Town Hall in 1858, and led to the 'surprise' find that a woman—Elizabeth Beecroft—had been centrally involved in the history of Kirkstall Forge Iron Works from 1779.<sup>77</sup> Other historical pageants after the Second World War by the same organization addressed such topics as 'Women Can Make Peace', a view said to represent the views of more than 2,150 members, alongside another pageant of which the aim was explicitly intended to address female citizenship, and what the *Sunderland Daily Echo* felt to be the guild's belief that 'women's social responsibility began when they gained the right to vote, and if the world is still in a mess they must share the blame equally with the men'.<sup>78</sup> During the era which heralded second-wave feminism, women were still using historical pageants and theatre as a powerful visual channel through which to fight patriarchal constructs. This generation of women appropriated many of the established tropes that had been developed across the century. 'The Brilliant and the Dark' opera, for instance, staged by the Women's Institute at the Royal Albert Hall in London in 1969, led the audience through a history of women's experiences, including women dressed as suffrage supporters, nuns, peasants, and cooks, amongst others.

Historical pageants organized by women's organizations of the inter-war years in Britain reveal the range in priorities for these groups through their choice of characters and themes, influenced by marital status, religious belief, occupation, nationality, location, class, age, and personal interest. Many women's groups were wedded to using pageants to show support for nationalistic sentiment and 'progress', which can be difficult to reconcile. These pageants do, however, demonstrate there was a coherent circulation of beliefs amidst

<sup>77</sup> 'News-notes for women', *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 2 March 1950, 3.

<sup>78</sup> 'Women can make peace', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 3 July 1946, 5, 'Townswomen's Guilds at Festival Hall', *The Stage*, 17 June 1954, 10.

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mainstream organizations for girls and women that it was essential to promote the active role that women had played in the past, and could play in present and future society. Such performances offer a new chronology for conceptualizing twentieth-century women's history, one that is more open to non-professional participation. Moving away from focus on the activities of those in the academy as a result of second-wave feminism, wide-ranging interest can be found in researching, performing, and exploring the complexities of women's histories across the first half of the twentieth century. A number of women even took care to include histories of everyday life in their pageants so as to make these productions of more relevance for 'ordinary' women. Historical pageants provided an informal way for women to engage—as little or as much as they wished—in disseminating stories about the historical adventures of women to their family, friends, and community, legitimized active female involvement in public life, and asserted a space for women's future involvement as citizens. Many women did not have the time, energy, or wish to define themselves as feminists, but pageants provided an opportunity to actively engage in an acceptable process of perpetuating feminist ideals, whilst not necessarily consciously articulating this in their self-representation. Historical pageants demonstrate the dispersed, yet committed, nature of the endeavours towards improving women's lives during the inter-war years, and enable a more pluralistic understanding of women's engagement in activism across Britain.